

Chapter Five -- "Weevily Wheat".

Mountain folks are pretty choosy about what we eat, even if you mightn't guess it. At least, nobody but trash would eat anything that was soured, or musty, or weevily -- unless it was that or starve.

Not that we're prejudiced against anything that's good, no matter how humble it might be -- with one exception. I never have known a soul in the mountains, blueblood or trash, that would eat chitlins. It isn't that we feel too good to eat them, but our speech in the mountains is still pretty close to the English of Colonial days.

In case you never heard of 'em before, chitlins are the innards of the pig, very carefully cleaned and washed, and the inner lining peeled out.

Mostly they're cut up in small pieces, stewed till they're tender, then battered and fried like oysters. Southerners in the lowlands are just as squeamish as mountaineers, but they manage to accept chitlins by changing the name to chitterlings. That g really belongs there, if you believe in usin' all those g's at the end of words. But the rest of the frills are just plain deception, an' while a mountaineer may take the other fellow in, especially in a trade, he never dupes himself.

I never learned to eat chitlins till we were livin' down in Georgia, an' one day in hog-killin' time Jess Trapp invited us up to his house for supper.

I'll never forget that meal. Mrs. Trapp was a real cook, an'

she had outdone herself, because Father was the school principal, an' Mr. Trapp was on the School Board. She was a little, skinny woman, an' I long ago learned never to board with skinny people that don't know how to eat. But Jess was a big man with a big, round belly, an' he ate enough to do for both, an' to keep her in the cookin' notion.

Her sister was livin' with them, too, an' both the women had worked on that supper. By Southern etiquette Mother should have offered to go out in the kitchen an' help, we found out later. But she didn't know, and they never held it against us, because they knew we weren't used to their ways. They wouldn't have let her help much, anyway, because she had on her Sunday clothes.

They had hot biscuits -- the fly-open kind that almost opened themselves when Mr. Trapp would say: "Take two. An' butter 'em while they're hot."

They had good cornbread too, but they'd have been insulted if we'd called it that. They called it "egg bread". In Kentucky they nearly always put an egg or two in the cornbread, if they have any. But farther south if they leave out the egg it's "cornbread".

Mrs. Trapp had made three kinds of cake, includin' angel food, an' two kinds of pie, blackberry cobbler and peach flat-pie. There were stewed backbones an' baked spare-ribs. But the real glory of that supper was chitlins. In Georgia practically nobody was squeamish about chitlins in those days, except foreigners an' city people, and they're always finicky about everything.

I can still remember how glassy Mother's eyes were, an' how green Shirley was about the gills. Dad always had a strong stomach, an' he did pretty well, and so did Walter. (That was after Ernest

had married off an' was raisin' a family of his own.)

It was the first time I'd ever tasted chitlins, an' I loved 'em. I guess it was my appetite that saved the day -- or the night -- for the Swetnam honor. I waded in an' made the chitlins an' biscuits fly.

There are two ways of cookin' chitlins. People who are going to fry them in batter generally stew them pretty well done and tender. But Mrs. Trapp only stewed them a little, then rolled them in flour and fried them. They're tough that way, but the flavor is fine.

Jess watched me rasslin' with 'em, an' the more he watched, the better he enjoyed it. I was about twelve then, an' had just learned how to enjoy eatin', an' I did a good job.

The more Jess Trapp watched me, the more it tickled him. Finally he asked me (by that time they'd found out it was the first time we'd ever tasted chitlins) how I liked 'em.

I was too busy eatin' to think, so I just blurted out: "Fine. But they're kinda tough on my jaws."

I don't think Jess ever saw me again without givin' me a dig in the ribs an' sayin': "Tough on your jaws, eh, George?"

Yes, we're pretty choosy in the mountains about our food, an' nearly anybody will enjoy singin' the favorite verse of the old dance song, "Charlie", that goes:

Ohhhh.. I want no more of your weevily wheat,

An' I want no more of your barley;

But I want just a little of your finest flour,

To bake a cake for Charlie.

But there was one time when even weevily wheat would have

tasted good. The Dry Autumn was long before my day -- around 1880, when Mother was a little girl. But I've heard it told so often that I feel just like I'd been there.

Grandpa an' Grandma Stafford had started out just as pore as they come, with just one old horse, an' before long it lay down an' died. Grandma was awful down-hearted, for they'd been havin' an awful hard time, an' that was the fall they'd been married nearly a year.

In the spring one day they didn't have a thing in the house to eat except the potatoes Grandma was just goin' to plant in the garden. So she peeled them kind of thick, ate the potatoes an' planted the peelings. They grew all right, too, an' Grandma always said the Lord helps those that help themselves. But she was about ready to change her mind when the old horse died.

Grandpa came in an' found her cryin', but he patted her on the back an' cheered her up.

"Stafford's a-goin' to come!" he told her. And Stafford did, but it wasn't as easy as it sounded.

Grandpa tried nearly everything, but he couldn't farm without a horse, an' nobody seemed to need anything done he could do. Finally he came home lookin' awful hang-dog.

"I'm ashamed to tell you, George Ann," he said. "But the only thing I can find to do is keep a tavern."

Keepin' a tavern wasn't disgraceful, but it wasn't looked on as very respectable, either, for it was mostly sellin' liquor by the drink. Nobody had anything against liquor, but that didn't seem like the right way to sell it, I guess.

Grandma thought about it a while an' said: "Well, I don't like

it either, but it seems like it's all we can do."

They had a house with enough room, so Grandpa built a bar, an' they got up some old beds with rope for springs, but they didn't have anything to stuff mattresses with, an' Grandma tore corn shucks up into fine strips an' stuffed 'em. A corn shuck mattress is pretty rough to sleep on, but it was all they had.

The law in Johnson County in those days said a man couldn't run a tavern unless all his beds were feather beds. Uncle Green Baily was the inspector, an' he came down to inspect the beds before the county judges would make out the tavern license.

Uncle Green was a mighty good old man, an' wouldn't swear a lie, or tell one, either. He wanted to help. But he knew Grandpa was too pore to have that many featherbeds.

"Jess," he said to Grandpa, "do ye have airy featherbed in the house?"

"Yes, Mr. Baily," Grandpa said. "I've got just one."

"Where is it?" Uncle Green asked. Grandpa took him to it, an' he felt of it, an' then started back to town.

Grandpa found out afterwards what happened at Paintsville when he gave his report.

He told how clean the place was, an' how it was fixed up, which wasn't very fancy, but would do.

"Was the beds all featherbeds?" they asked him.

"Every one I felt of was a feather bed," Uncle Green said.

So Grandpa ran the tavern, an' when men that had already had too much would want to buy more liquor he'd say:

"Jim, I run a tavern, an' the law won't let me refuse to sell liquor to any man. But you've had too much now. Please don't drink

it."

I don't know whether many of 'em ever listened to him, but it made him feel better about keeping tavern till he could do better. After a while he got a little ahead, an' he an' his older brother went in together an' built a mill.

They ran it together for a while, an' made some money, an' Grandpa built a good house, just down the creek from the mill.

That was the Dry Autumn, an' it was mighty dry.

There wasn't much wheat raised in the mountains in that day, an' long before winter came Grandpa an' his brother would be buyin' wheat from down the river to grind at their mill. But this time the summer was dry, an' there wasn't enough water in Paint Creek to float a jo-boat.

In those days there weren't any roads, either. Now you can go over Red Bush from Staffordsville to Blaine in an automobile at fifty miles an hour. But as late as 1916 I can recall going that same trip when it took two whole days with a two-horse team, and half the way there wasn't any road, an' the wagon had to follow the creek bed. And just three or four years before that I remember one spring when it took two big horses half a day to pull the mail hack three miles from Paintsville to Staffordsville, an' Jim Hartle got his buggy stuck in a mud-hole on the same road, an' hipped his horse tryin' to get it out.

The railroad didn't come to Paintsville then, an' maybe not more than to Ashland, where Big Sandy runs into the Ohio River. Most of the time Grandpa would get his wheat (an' other things, too, after he started his store later) brought up the river on flat-boats. The boats were big and square, but didn't draw much water, an' men could guide them down Paint Creek to Paintsville and then

on down the Levisa Fork of Sandy, with a sweep oar, and pole them back up with long poles, when the water wasn't too high.

It didn't take much water for flat boats, but that Dry Autumn there wasn't even enough to get them up to Paintsville. And Grandpa didn't have anything to grind but corn. Of course he sold his flour out pretty close, always figurin' there'd be rain soon, an' probably the miller's family was out of flour quick as anyone else.

Corn bread is mighty good when you want it. But when you've had nothing but corn bread for weeks, it gets awfully tiresome, especially for children. Grandma varied it with gritted bread while she could get any green corn. That's made by grating off the milky corn from the cob, an' most times it's a delicacy. But after a while the time came when there wasn't any green corn, an' the kids had eaten corn bread, an' hoe cakes an' corn cakes till they lost their appetites, an' were cryin' for lightbread or biscuits. Old Mrs. Millard, whom we knew later down at Bethesda, Tennessee, used to make corn-lightbread, but Grandma never had heard about that. Even weevily wheat would almost have been tempting.

At last, one day, biscuits appeared on the table, though there hadn't been a bit of rain. They weren't exactly up to standard, but their texture was smooth enough to bring cheers. It was on a Sunday, when the usual run of company had come in for dinner.

Everybody was trying to figure out where Grandma had been able to get even any low-grade wheat, and she and Grandpa weren't sayin' a word. But they couldn't fool Jeff Hitchcock, the hired man, when it came time for the second table to eat.

Jeff was a good-hearted, ignorant fellow of the kind Heaven

seems to have cut out especially to be a hired man. He had a lot of ability to do things he was told, but never could seem to figure out how to do anything for himself.

He had two odd characteristics. One was a weakness for whiskey that kept him from drinking more than a spoonful or so without passing out. I remember Uncle Jesse used to say it would make Jeff drunk just to smell of the bottle.

The other peculiarity was the sharpest taste in the world, which included a fondness for strong, rancid butter. Even in a day without ice, Grandma's butter was nearly always fresh and good, for she washed out any milk that was left in the butter after churning, and kept the butter cool in a cold spring near the house.

Jeff, who ate with the family, as was the custom with hired men and hired girls in the mountains, would taste the butter and roar:

"George Ann, ain't you got no older a butter nor this?"

On that Sunday, though, he took up one of the biscuits and tasted it reflectively. Then he roared:

"George Ann! You sarched this meal."

He was right. Grandma had prepared her surprise by having Grandpa grind some corn meal very fine. Then she covered her sieve with bolting cloth, which most people then called sarch cloth, (I think the "sarch" was the same as "search") and sifted out the finest bits. Bolted meal was unknown in that day, and she had fooled everybody but Jeff.

It wasn't long after that till enough rain came along that flat boats could get up Sandy, and Grandpa sent a team of oxen to the mouth of Paint to meet them and bring up a load of wheat.

So far as I know, he never "sarched" any more meal, as long as

he ran the mill. And nobody in our family has ever liked bolted meal, either. Grandpa always said it ground all the life out of the corn to get it fine enough for bolting, and made it get stale too fast. But even when I get back to the mountains now, all I can find in the country stores is bolted meal, ground in Frankfort or Cincinnati or Louisville. I'd give anything for a taste of the old water-ground meal Mother got so tired of that Dry Autumn!